HOLY WASTE:
EXTRAVAGANT INTIMACY WITH DEAREST FRIENDS
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 32
John 12:1–11

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard,
anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair.
The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."
John 12:3 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth.
Open our minds and hearts to the word you have for us today.
Open us to your Word made flesh in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This incident makes me uncomfortable. I don't know about you, but in my upbringing, public displays of emotion were frowned on: "There is a time and place for everything, and it isn't public. Keep your emotions to yourself; don't get carried away." "Whatever you do, don't declare your love publicly and carve your initials plus the initials of your beloved into a tree." "Fools names and fools faces always appear in public places." Public displays of affection were particularly frowned on. Our religion was Presbyterian, which meant that it was unemotional, controlled, reasonable, and certainly not spontaneous. The Methodist side of the family was a little suspect frankly, because they were so demonstrative and enthusiastic about hymn singing. Other people might shout and weep and stand up and wave their hands around and sing fervently, but we Presbyterians preferred our religion sitting down with a bulletin in our hands to tell us how to express ourselves. "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" was about as enthusiastic as it ever got. And no displays of affection except in the privacy of your home, and then only with a very select few – mother, father, sisters, brothers – although "Brother" was pushing it. Men don't say "I love you" to each other and certainly don't throw their arms around one another unless it's your father or brother. (There were exceptions: even Dad couldn't make it through the national anthem without a tear in his eye.)

So this makes me uncomfortable—this gesture of very public and very extravagant emotion: Mary pouring a lot of expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, in public, right out there where God and everybody else could see.

We've been following Jesus, and the people he encounters, in the Gospel of John, using as a resource Frances Taylor Gench's book *Encounters with Jesus.* Last week it was the raising of Lazarus and the irritation of his two sisters, Martha and Mary. The Gospel of John calls these encounters signs, signs of John's staggering assertion that God's Word, God's inclination to speak to humankind, actually happened in the life of a Palestinian Jew by the name of Jesus. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John announces in the first paragraph of his book, "and here are some stories to help you see what that means."

This morning we arrive at the epicenter. It is the day before Jesus will ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and set off a riotous public demonstration that will precipitate his arrest. Actually his fate has already been sealed. When word reaches the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem that he has raised up a dead man and many people are now following him, the authorities, ever wary of upsetting the Roman occupation forces, decide that it will be best for everyone if they can find a way to get rid of him. "Better for one man to die than the whole nation to be destroyed," Caiaphas, the chief priest says, an unpleasant but understandable executive decision. In fact, they have issued an order that if anyone sees Jesus, they are to report it immediately so he can be arrested before he causes any more trouble.

So that is this context. Jesus' dear friends, Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, who was given his life back, have arranged a dinner party in their home at Bethany just two miles outside Jerusalem. Jesus is a wanted man, under a death sentence. So there is a very real element of danger surrounding this encounter.

Guests at a dinner party recline around a low table or a cloth spread on the dirt floor. They dip chunks of bread into a bowl of oil. They eat olives and pomegranates and, if it is a festive occasion, maybe some lamb, and they drink wine from cups if the host is affluent or, if not, from a common cup. A servant keeps the bread coming and the bowl of oil and the wine goblets filled, stepping over the extended feet of the guests. At this dinner, as usual, Martha is doing the serving—Martha who, just a few days before, was scolding Jesus for showing up too late, after her brother had died, but who also was the first person to put into words the feelings of her heart, our first creed: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Have you noticed how women in these 2,000-year-old stories are assertive, opinionated, and smart and insist on being taken seriously at a time and in a culture when that was not the norm? Jesus is there, so are Lazarus, Mary, and some of Jesus' disciples and friends. There is pleasant small talk about the weather and the wine, laughter, conviviality—probably to avoid the impending disaster everyone knows is ahead. And in the midst of it, without warning, Mary pours a jar of very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and

then, of all things, proceeds to loosen her hair, tied tightly in braids, and dry his feet.

There's a lot going on here. It was a lot of perfume, so much that the aroma of it filled the room—expensive perfume, maybe Mary's lifetime supply. It came from India. You used it sparingly, carefully, to anoint the dead body of a loved one, to sprinkle a few drops on yourself for a special occasion. You did not pour it out. And, of course, there was the intimacy of the gesture, the feet, the loosened hair. Some commentators can't resist suggesting romantic implications. Was she really anointing his body for death? Was she overwhelmed with gratitude that her brother was alive and they were together again? Whatever else it was, it was an act of extravagance, a very public act of deep love and devotion.

"What a waste. What a foolish waste," someone says out loud. It's Judas. He's the treasurer, holds the purse, accepts contributions, pays the bills, and, John explains, skims a little off the top for himself. Judas's question, however, is not unreasonable: good trustees ask the same question. "Why wasn't the perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" He's the bookkeeper. The perfume could have been sold for 300 denarri. One denarri is a day's wage. Three hundred is a year's income. That's a lot of money; it could do a lot of good. After all, institutions hire consultants to help them know the highest and best use of assets, to achieve long-term goals. Giving it all away for love, pouring out a valuable asset on someone's feet, isn't ordinarily among the recommendations.

Jesus comes to her defense. "She's been keeping the perfume for my burial, which could happen any day now. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Opponents of welfare programs to help poor people like to quote Jesus to justify not passing legislation that might actually help poor people. So it's worth pausing to observe that he was quoting the law, a phrase everyone knew, from the book of Deuteronomy, which urges generosity to the poor. This is what it says: "Give liberally and be ungrudging. . . . Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor" (Deuteronomy 15:10). So to cite "the poor you always have with you" as a reason not to extend help is a distortion and certainly not what Jesus meant—Jesus who, after all, spent his whole life among mostly poor people and who had a whole lot more to say about poverty and economic justice than he said about sex, which was virtually nothing.

It is, however, a reasonable question: Why not use the valuable asset to do some good? Why waste it? The question deserves thoughtful attention. When times are tough, is it appropriate to fill the church with poinsettias at Christmas and lilies on Easter, wonders Fred Craddock. When the homeless poor are lined up at the door, is it right to fix the pipe organ? The answer is

not simple, as Jesus tried to teach Judas. Sometimes, apparently, there is nothing more important than the impulse to act extravagantly and beautifully out of a heart full of love.

John Shelby Spong, a retired Episcopal bishop who is in the news a lot for challenging his church's orthodoxy and traditional morality, wrote an article long ago for the *Christian Century,* one that I have never forgotten. He was the Bishop of Newark at a time when the city was in dreadful shape. He wrote, "Urban life is not beautiful. Garbage collections are generally poor. Trash litters the streets. Many city people are so depressed that they deliberately fill their lives with ugliness, as a commentary on the way they feel valued by others. Consequently, money spent to beautify urban houses of worship is not wasted—urban churches need to shine as symbols of hope, as signs of the kingdom."

Mary poured out her heart, her deep love and hope. She put herself at great risk by so publically identifying herself with Jesus, and she risked the immediate ridicule and disdain of the rational and reasonable men around her, one of whom, in fact, tried to call her out.

One of the very best treatments of this incident is in an unlikely source: a little book of essays and sermons by the late Paul Tillich. Tillich was one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century. Born in Germany, he was a professor of philosophy at several leading German universities, a refugee from Hitler, a professor at Union Seminary in New York City, Harvard, and finally, late in his life, the University of Chicago. He was a Lutheran minister and a theologian, but everyone—Christian or non-Christian, believer or atheist—was interested in his thought. His thought was, to say the very least, dense, difficult. I met him once when I was in my final year of divinity school. He has just come to Chicago, and everyone wanted to hear the great man. His lectures on the history of Western civilization were delivered to a standing-room audience in the university's largest hall. I attended then and didn't understand a word he said. But sometimes Paul Tillich could be simple and crystal clear.

About Mary he said, "She has performed an act of holy waste growing out of the abundance of her heart. Judas," Tillich observed, "has his emotional life under control. . . . Jesus (alone) knows that without the abundance of heart nothing great can happen. . . . He knows that calculating love is not love at all."

"The history of humankind," Tillich continues, "is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear to waste themselves in the service of a new creation. They wasted out of the fullness of their hearts."

Surely Tillich was thinking of those imprudent and passionate souls, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke out against the policies of the German government under Hitler and paid dearly for it, those brave enough to risk life itself and who often lost their lives because their hearts were so full of love for their nation, for truth and justice, that they would not allow themselves to be reasonable and prudent and silent.

What's at stake here? "People are sick," he said, "not only because they have not received love but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves."

There is a remarkable scene in the middle of the motion picture *The Young Victoria.* Victoria, in her early twenties, is now Queen of England and Great Britain. Her childhood and youth have been absolutely controlled. She has been reared to be the queen. She has been trained and schooled in every appropriate word to speak and gesture to make. She cannot descend a staircase without her hand properly placed in the hand of a lady-in-waiting. And then she falls in love with Albert, a German prince. After a very proper and controlled courtship, they marry, at least in part for political reasons. In the process, however, they fall in love, wildly, passionately in love. My favorite scene happens when in the middle of a horseback ride they are caught in a rain storm. They stand under a grove of sheltering trees, waiting patiently. There are probably no rules for how to do this. But then something wonderful happens: they look in each others' eyes and love simply overcomes restraint and control and they hold hands and run out into the rain, across a soggy field, laughing. Albert falls down—in the mud, the Queen of England and her Prince Consort.

How sad to live your whole life and never have loved so deeply that you did something so foolish, so extravagant, that it makes you blush to think of it. How sad to have lived your whole life without ever throwing caution to the wind and doing something wonderfully outrageous. How sad never to have loved so much that you would have given everything—your life itself—for the sake of it.

Frederick Buechner writes that if the church is ever destroyed, it will not be "just from without by a world that sees it as a dead-end street but by people like you and me who destroy it from within by our deadness and staleness, our failure to be brave, to be human, to take chances" ("Dereliction," *A Room Called Remember,* p. 125).

There is a wonderful moment that happens at the Fourth Church Mission Benefit, an event where 600 church members and friends dress up, eat and drink together, and dance and spend money that will support the community mission projects of this church. Some might frown on all that eating and drinking and dancing, but we overcome that, for an evening at

least. After dinner there is the predictable auction. For the last several years the auctioneer has been Ron Magers, news anchor at Channel 7. Everybody in Chicago knows Ron and respects him for his steady, reliable, and honest news reporting. He's a real celebrity, and he loves this church's mission. So he is our auctioneer, and he does a wonderful job convincing people to pay a lot of money for trips to Argentina, meals at great restaurants, and box seats for Sox and Cubs games, sometimes with the minister (someone has to do it!). When all the items are sold, Ron reminds the audience, which is having great fun, about the child who will be tutored, the hungry fed, the homeless sheltered, and then he says, "Who will give $5,000? Raise your hand" and a few people do. "Who will give $2,500?" A few more do. "$1000, $500, $250? Who will stand up and give $100 so that children can read and hungry people are fed?" It's counterintuitive, a little irrational, a lot spontaneous. Ron Magers is urging you to give away money for the joy of it—for the love of it, actually. And you know you just want to be a part of that and you do it.

This church this morning, March 14, 2010, is at the beginning of a great adventure. (If you are a visitor, you can tune out the next minute.) We need more space—for our infants and children and young people. We need more space to gather as a community, to serve our neighborhood and city. We are three times larger than the congregation for which this building was built in 1914. We need to raise a lot of money—hold your breath: $32 million—to get the job done. We are just beginning to talk to some of our members about supporting this adventure, and we will be soon asking everyone, members and friends, to give, and to give generously. And it will require an abundance of heart, a willingness to be brave, to venture, to risk and to give generously and extravagantly.

"Without the abundance and heart, nothing great can happen," the dignified old German philosopher wrote. "Do not suppress in yourselves the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender. . . . Keep yourself open for the creative moment. Do not suppress the impulse to do what Mary did at Bethany. You will be reproached as she was. But Jesus was on her side and he is also on yours." (Tillich, "Holy Waste," *The New Being,* pp.46–49).

In two weeks it will be Palm Sunday, and as we approach the end of this journey, we begin to think about Holy Week and a Last Supper and a crucifixion on a Friday afternoon, and I find myself asking more and more what it was like for him. He had alternatives. He knew about the charges that had been leveled at him: that he was a rabble-rouser, that he disrespected the conventions and violated the traditional morality of religion, that he was a disturber of the peace, that he was a threat to Pax Romana. He knew that people were calling him Messiah, Lord, King. He knew it could cost him his life. It would have been altogether reasonable, prudent, and so understandable had he turned around and headed north,

back to Galilee, out of harm's way, had he withdrawn from view for a while, resumed his teaching in the synagogue, practiced a little carpentry, and lived to a ripe old age. There were plenty of people who advised him to do just that.

Instead, he visited his friends, allowed Mary her act of extravagant love, and then got up the next morning and rode into Jerusalem, to his death.

What a waste. What an amazing, magnificent, holy waste.

Amen.